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SUBJECT: HCMC CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE PUSHES FOR GREATER ROLE IN HIV/AIDS FIGHT

REF: A) HCMC 984; B) HCMC 398

1. (SBU) From October 27 to 29, the HCMC Archdiocese hosted an international workshop on strategies to care for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). The declared goal of the workshop was to develop a concrete action plan for the Church on HIV/AIDS in HCMC. The unwritten subtext was an effort to press -- and even shame -- HCMC authorities into giving the Archdiocese more latitude to conduct HIV/AIDS activities. (Per reftels, the Archdiocese has become increasingly frustrated with lack of local government cooperation in administering the HIV/AIDS clinic in the Trong Diem drug rehabilitation center and in approving new community-based HIV/AIDS initiatives.)

2. (SBU) Local government and Party representation at the workshop was strong. Representatives from the HCMC Fatherland Front, HCMC's HIV/AIDS Committee, Department of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA), and the Orphan Protection Organization attended, as did a number of overseas Catholic NGOs, including Caritas Germany and Norway and Catholic Relief Services. A representative of Japanese Consulate also attended.

3. (SBU) In his opening speech, Cardinal Pham Minh Man, Archbishop of HCMC, emphasized the Church's desire to broaden its cooperation with local government to combat HIV/AIDS. He introduced the Church's newest initiative: to set up an integrated and holistic center run by the Church for PLWHA in HCMC. The Center, if and when established, will house HIV infected children, provide all PLWHA with support in health care, education, vocational training, employment, psycho-spiritual care and other cultural activities to enable them continue a constructive life. He called on local government to support and facilitate the program.

4. (SBU) Group discussion, particularly on the level of government support for the Church's activities, was frank and often heated. For example, Sister To Nga, responsible for the Church's flagship program supporting an AIDS clinic at DOLISA-run Trong Diem drug rehabilitation center, expressed her grave disappointment over the lack of cooperation with the Center's administrators and the difficult conditions under which the Church team had to operate. She complained that "we could do much more to help than what we are allowed." She protested that the center would not allow patients to die "in the caring hands of the sisters at the clinic," but mandated their transfer to local hospitals.

5. (SBU) The immediate response from the official representatives was positive. Tran Trung Tin, Vice Director of HCMC Fatherland Front Committee, praised the contributions of the Church and the Buddhists in the city's combat with the pandemic. The DOLISA representative acknowledged that "nobody could care for dying people better than religious workers". Dr. Lan Thao, of the HCMC HIV/AIDS Committee, said that the HIV/AIDS Committee fully supports the Church's initiative on the integrated center. Responding to heated questions from some of the participants on the problems the Church faced in its HIV/AIDS work, Thao asserted that the Committee is preparing a new regulation for HCMC government that will provide detailed guidelines to local administrators and NGOs on HIV/AIDS prevention activities. Thao emphasized that, with an estimated 263,000 PLWHA nationwide -- and 500 newly HIV-infected mothers and 150-200 babies born with HIV each year in HCMC alone -- HCMC, and Vietnam writ large, had no choice but to develop effective public-private partnerships on HIV/AIDS.

6. (SBU) Comment: It is highly unusual for the Church to push the envelope so publicly to put pressure on the local government to support the Archdiocese's HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment activities. While it reflects the Cardinal's frustration with the current state of affairs in HCMC, it also suggests that the Church believes that officialdom is more tolerant and open to dialogue initiated by NGOs. Judged by the positive responses from local government representatives, the Cardinal's gambit can be considered a PR success. However, it remains to be seen if the goodwill and positive rhetoric will translate into improved government operational support and cooperation on the ground.

WINNICK